i

Music and Its impact on

Writing Productivity

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Education 702.22

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December 17, 2009

Table of Contents

Page

Abstract ……………………………………………………………………………… ii Introduction

Statement of the problem …………………………………………………………… 2

Review of related Literature ………………………………………………………… 2 Statement of the hypothesis ………………………………………………………….. 9

Method

Participants………………………………………………………………………………9

Instruments………………………………………………………………………………10

Experimental design…………………………………………………………………….. 11

Procedure……………………………………………………………………………….. 12

Results

Discussion………………………………………………………………………………. 14

Implications………………………………………………………………………………15

References………………………………………………………………………………..16

Appendices

Appendix A

Appendix B

Appendix C

ii

Abstract

1

Introduction

In 2003 the National Commission on Writing (as cited in Kissel, 2008, p. 53) pleaded for a writing revolution in education. The commission called for an increase of attention on the subject writing which is considered the most neglected of the three R’s. Over the years the teaching of writing has seen many changes and currently there is greater emphasis on reading than there is on writing given the No Child Left Behind Act. Applebee & Langer (2009) asserts all of these changes is just cause for teachers to evaluate how these changes have affected the teaching and learning of writing in American schools. Taking a look at the writing of students in American schools in 2007 the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (as cited in Applebee & Langer, p. 20) reported that between 80% and 90% of middle and high school students had achieved what they identify as the basic writing skills appropriate for their grade level. However, only 31% at grade 8 and 23% at grade 12 are considered proficient. In the NAEP framework this means that the majority of students in this grade are not capable of producing an effectively organized paper with fully developed responses. Also many students are not receiving writing assignments which are lengthy and complex and require creative and analytical thinking. As a result these students are ill prepared for writing assignment in college which require critical and analytical thinking as well as longer papers. Currently the focus of writing is on process oriented writing, yet still students writing is not where it should be.

2

Statement of the Problem

Across the nation a large percentage of elementary school students writing skills are below the proficient level, partly because students are just not interested in the writing prompts that their teachers assign and they lack a motivation for writing. Integrating music in the classroom to support teacher’s writing instructions can enhance students writing skills and increase their motivation towards writing.

Review of Related Literature

Various instructional strategies have been used in elementary schools to teach writing over the past 30 years. In the 1970’s the teaching of writing focused substantially on the mechanics of grammar and punctuation. When describing Peg Sudol’s experience with teaching writing, Sudol & Sudol (1991) reported that Peg was not required to teach writing prior to 1985 and instead she taught parts of speech, complete sentences, capitalization, and punctuation with an occasional creative writing assignment. Much has changed since then. New texts written by Calkins, Atwell, and Graves became the handbooks of the new pedagogy (Sudol &Sudol), and the focus changed to workshop models and the writing process. The writing process consists of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing. This type of writing strategy often includes conferencing with teachers and peers. Other current strategies include guided writing where teachers model writing and guide their students through the thinking process of writing (Box), and interactive writing where students and teachers collaborate in the construction of text while building on prior knowledge (Patterson, Schaller, & Clemmens). Despite these various strategies

3

for teaching writing, teachers across the nation report that many of their students hate writing, and a need for motivational strategies during writing instruction is necessary.

Students rarely respond well to the writing prompts that teachers assign. They often perceive writing as a chore and often times do not care about the contents of what they are writing. As a result teachers are faced with the task of motivating their students to write. Teachers know that writing is an essential part of academic success and, as facilitators of learning they try to identify factors that can positively impact students’ motivation for writing and improve overall writing ability. Music as a motivational tool has been cited by many researchers, theorists, and teachers, as a way to improve students writing, as well as overall academic achievement. When writing is combined with music Scott (1996) noted that students not only expand their appreciation for music, but they also use their writing skills and are made aware of the possibilities that exist for words and music.

A growing body of research reveals the beneficial effects of music on student writing and overall academic achievement. In 1998 a study was done to measure the effect of music choice on two emotionally disturbed students’ writing motivations and writing skills. The study found that both students’ basic writing skills and creativity improved when they were exposed to music during writing assignments. The study also found that the music had a calming effect on both students helping them to concentrate on the writing assignments (Kariuki, & Honeycutt).

Donohoe &McNeely (1999) examined the effect of student music choice on writing productivity and found that there was an increase in the number of words written by students in the study.

Southgate & Roscigno (2009) explored the impact of music and adolescent achievement by examining various students’ music involvement in and out of school. They found that music

4

participation generally increases achievement levels. Another study in 1993 found that audio stimuli (hearing music) combined with a visual stimuli was effective in improving students’ descriptive writing. (Black, 1993)

Music is deemed beneficial to students not only in writing but also other areas of literacy such as reading. Because there are many similarities between literary acquisition and music development, combining the two appears very effective. Gardner (1998) theorized that musical intelligence runs in an almost structural parallel to linguistic intelligence. Lloyd (as cited in Wiggins, 2007, p. 55) drew many parallel skills such as auditory and visual discrimination, the ability to perceive the likeness and differences in sounds shapes and symbols, and eye motor coordination, reading from left to right top to bottom. Hansen, Bernstorf, &Stuber (as cited in Wiggins, 2007, p.55) also drew several parallels between music and literacy such as phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and fluency. Along with sharing parallel skills, music combined with writing helps to motivate and engage students, two of the many goals that teachers share when trying to get their students to write.

Researchers, teachers, and theorists also indicate that using music to support and enhance writing helps to meet the needs of students different learning styles and ties into Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences (Eady & Wilson, 2004; Pearman, 2003; Prescott, 2005;). DiEdwardo (2005) noted pairing linguistic and music intelligences triggers the brain’s cognitive functions demanded for reading and writing. (p. 129) As students are living in a world filled with technology, texting, gaming, visual and audio stimulus factors which Walsh (2008) considers “new literacies” teachers must resolve a way to keep students attention in an environment that

5

has changed since their attendance in elementary school and include these new literacies in order to maximize their students’ success.

Given music’s documented potential to motivate and support writing, teachers have attempted to implement the combination in their classrooms. When discussing how popular music can be used in connection with writing Rubin & Melinick (1998) noted that it can be used as an entrée for talking about written works and provide a route into writing. Perry (2007) advocates for using nee literacies such as music in order to show students that adults value their interests. She also noted that teenagers really like popular music, and details how a friend of hers uses music to teach students different modes of writing. Cooks (2004) described how teaching English skills was a challenge in his classroom and that hip-hop music helped to improve students engagement and writing ability. Earnest & Duncan (2002) also support the idea of using hip hop in the classroom when they describe using hip-hop to teach writing poetry. They noted that provocative rap texts open up topics for discussion and “these discussions may lead to more thoughtful analyses, which could translate into expository writing” (p.90). Weinstein (2006) profiled four young adults ages 15-22 and discussed how writing raps brought these young adults pleasure, which in turn made them enthusiastic about writing and engaged in their literary development. Furthermore popular music including rap and hip-hop can and has been used as a tool for motivating students to write as well as teaching them how to write. Popular music acts as a scaffold for literary concepts, is rich in metaphor, is culturally relevant to students, and the issues and lyrics in the music promote discussion and encourage a written response (Cooks, 2004; Earnest & Duncan, 2002; Weinstein, 2006; Perry, 2007 ;)

6

As music helps to enrich writing, teachers have claimed that the combination also works in reverse, that is writing can help to enrich music. Even music teachers are proponents for combining music and writing. Hansen (2009) explored how writing can provide rich opportunities for children to deepen their understanding of the many aspects of music. Hansen also encourages educators to illicit written responses to music. Pearman & Friedman (2009) noted different ways that a notebook can be used in a music classroom. They described having students divide the notebook into categories and using it for class notes and new vocabulary.

Along with motivating, and acting as a catalyst for writing music helps to enhance students self efficacy and experiences with writing, two related areas of research. Attitude, motivation, and engagement are vital factors that contribute to reading and writing success (Patterson et al, p. 496). Writing attitude is related to how students feel about writing and their potential for writing. Kim & Lorsbach (2005) investigated how students’ perceived self-efficacy is related to their writing abilities. When comparing the participants writing they found that students with high self-efficacy had a higher level of writing development than students with low self efficacy. Hudson (2001) conducted a study which included 430 first-sixth grade students and examined the relationship between the writing attitude and the writing achievement of the participants. The results of this study indicated that along with gender and grade level, students’ attitude toward writing is related to writing achievement (p.94). Thus when teachers use music in combination with writing and that music helps to motivate and change students’ attitude toward writing, it is possible to improve students writing productivity and ability.

With the abundance of researchers, theorists, and teachers who support combining music and writing, there is a lack of research that disputes the beneficial impacts of music on student

7

writing. However one study by Zehr (2000) examined the Mozart effect, listening music to improve spatial-temporal-reasoning, and found that it was only effective for college students and wore of within 15 minutes. Zehr also reported that researchers for this study did not find a significant relationship between the arts of any type, which includes music and improvements in academic achievement. Piro (2009) conducted study about music and literacy development to see if it possible to transfer skills from one talent to the next and concluded in terms of music and student achievement it’s not that simple. He stated “many education practitioners have been exposed to some hazy ‘music makes you smarter’ claims, proposing that listening to or making music, in general should somehow result in students with markedly advanced intellectual capacity” (p. 34). However, Piro does convey that in order for music to have an impact on student achievement educators must create competent instructional approaches.

Along with the skeptics of music’s positive impact on student achievement there are other reasons reported on why music is opposed as a motivation for writing. These reasons include it is a non-traditional way of teaching, teachers are not sure how to incorporate the two, and the lyrics of music can be provocative and have controversial perspectives. (Earnest& Duncan, 2009; Perry, 2007 ;) However, Rodesiler (2009) a former high school teacher and supporter of using music videos in the ELA classroom to prompt student writing asserts that the issue of the controversial lyrics can be solved by choosing music videos with age appropriate content. Although Rodesiler is incorporating music videos in his ELA class teachers can use this same discretion when choosing a song for students to listen and respond to.

Despite the few opponents, there is a large body of evidence that supports music in combination with writing acts as a motivational tool, and helps to improve students writing

8

attitudes and abilities. Since students live in a world today where things such as IPods, games, television, and music are much more engaging than writing ,some teachers have found a way to integrate these new literacies especially music into their classrooms in order to rejuvenate students feelings toward writing and improve their overall writing skills.

9

Statement of the Hypothesis:

**HR1**- Over the course of a five week period five 5th grade students at P.S. ABC in Brooklyn, N.Y. will demonstrate an increase in motivation for writing when music is integrated into their writing assignments.

**HR2**- Over a five week period five 5th grade students in P.S. ABC in Brooklyn, N.Y will demonstrate an increase in writing productivity and enhance their writing skills when music is integrated into their writing assignments.

Participants

Five fifth grade students participated in this study. All students attended the same public school located in an urban area. The participants were chosen as the researcher taught their fifth grade class. All students were identified as having low writing productivity, poor writing content, and feelings of reluctance toward writing. Following is a description of the population.

The school in which the five students were selected is located in Brooklyn, New York. There were 3 female students and 2 male students. No students in the class have any special education services. All students have been accustomed to writing under the writing workshop model. Prior to the study music had not been incorporated into the class during writing lessons.

10

Instruments

Several instruments were used to collect data for this study. Consent forms were sent to parents for their child’s participation in the study. The researcher observed students behaviors before, during, and after their writing assignments prior to integrating music into the writing assignments. Based on these observations two surveys were and distributed to the students in this study prior to integrating music into their writing assignments. One survey was to assess students’ attitude and motivation for writing as well as their attitude toward music, and the other was to assess students’ perception of how well they write.

11

Experimental Design

12

Procedure

13

Results

14

Discussion

15

Implications

16

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17

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18

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Appendix A

Parent Consent Form

Dear parents/guardians,

I am a graduate student at Brooklyn College. As part of my coursework this semester I am required to complete an action research project. Your child has been asked to in this project which examines the impacts of music on student writing. As improving students writing is the goal of this research project I am asking that you give your child permission to participate in this project. The students selected for this project will participate in a group two times a week over the course of five weeks. I will be using popular music as way to open up discussions and then giving the students a writing prompt based on the songs listened to. Each student participating in the action research project will remain confidential no names or other identifying characteristics will be used.

Thanks in advance,

Onekqua N. Henry

\_\_\_\_ Yes, I give permission for my child to be part of the action research project.

\_\_\_\_ No, I do not give permission for my child to be part of the data collection procedure.

\_\_\_\_ I would like more information before giving my permission.

Print Child’s Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B

**Student Music& Writing Attitude Survey**

Directions: For each statement place the number on the corresponding line that you mostly agree with.

=1= =2= =3= =4=

Strongly Disagree Agree Strongly

Disagree Disagree

1**.** Writing is boring. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

2. I like listening to music. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

3. I like to write in my spare time. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

4. I enjoy writing notes and letters to people. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

5. I like writing at school. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

6. I have trouble thinking about what to write. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

7. It is fun to write things at home. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

8. I can study write to music. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

8. I like to share my writing with others. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

9. Writing is fun. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

10. I wish I had more time to write at school. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

11. I can pay attention while music playing. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

12. I think I’m a good writer. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

13. I like to write. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

14. I write often write at home. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

15. I like to write about things that have happened to me. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

16. It is difficult to study to music \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C

**Student writing skill survey**

Directions: For each statement place the number on the corresponding line that you mostly agree with.

=1= =2= =3= =4=

Strongly Disagree Agree Strongly

Disagree Disagree

1. I write well. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
2. I get good grades on my writing assignments. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
3. My writing always contains a beginning, middle, and end. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
4. Writing is difficult for me. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
5. My writing has a logical sequence. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
6. I write better when I free write than when given a topic. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
7. I get mostly 4’s on my report card for writing workshop. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
8. My teacher thinks I write well. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
9. I am good at spelling. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
10. I use many details when I write. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_